

GOOD FRIDAY MEDIEVALION - APRIL 13, 1966

The Paradox of Calvary

Christianity is a religion of paradox. | A paradox is (an assertion seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense, but that is yet true in fact.) For instance, Christianity points to a Holy, Almighty, Omnipotent God who is sovereign in all his creation but at the same time a God who chose to reveal himself through the history of an obscure near Eastern nation. | That is a paradox: common sense--apart from any prior knowledge or faith tells us that it is preposterous.] Or again, Christianity points to the birth of a baby to one Mary and her husband Joseph--in the small town of Bethlehem, somewhere behind ~~our~~ in Ann, in a stable, ^{and then} ~~But Christianity~~ goes on to claim that in the moment of ^{that humble} birth Almighty God came into the world. | That too is a paradox--common sense would never bring us to make this claim.

Christianity is a religion of paradox. | It is part and parcel of our Faith--this invasion of a divine otherness into our comfortable world of reason and common sense. | But above all the Paradox of Christianity there rises a single event, more perplexing than all the rest, more contradictory, more difficult to comprehend--and that is the execution of Jesus Christ. | Predictably, this crowning paradox--this event, that stretches the tension between faith and common sense to the breaking point, is the very heart of the Christian religion. Take it away and there would be nothing left but a wonderful man who espoused a few noble ideas, but who ultimately passed from the scene unnoticed and unheralded.

Christmas

It's one thing to preach a ~~Christian~~ sermon about the birth of Jesus and to point out the paradox there. But it's quite another thing altogether to preach about his death. For the paradox cuts too deeply-- and the temptation to merely remain silent in bewilderment is great.

John Milton celebrated the birth of Jesus in his glorious ode ("On the Morning of Christ's Nativity.") He tried also to write a companion piece about Jesus' death. In his published works one finds the uncompleted first stanza with the following appended note: ("This subject the author finding above the years he had when he wrote it, and nothing availing with what was begun, left it unfinished.") I would like you to ^{with me} share Milton's despair this evening, for we are here to think about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and that subject contains some of the most perplexing contrasts we can every face.

Consider, finally, the greatness and the smallness of the event. That last week of Jesus' earthly life must rank high in the list of history's most significant events. The majesty of Imperial Rome was there, one of the world's oldest and greatest religions was there; the most moving personality in all of man's long story was there. And the events that transpired between these three ~~elements~~ have influenced the course of history, deeply and profoundly, ever since. Yet this grand historical episode somehow involves you and me; somehow we find ourselves ^{wrapped up} ~~involved~~ in it, in a most intimate and personal manner.

You are familiar with the very moving Negro Spiritual ("Were you there, when they crucified my Lord.") It never occurred to men to ask that question about the assassination of Julius Caesar or Abraham Lincoln-- two events that shook the very foundations of their respective cultures. But for some reason men have asked it of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ; ~~we~~ somehow men have never been able to look at that scene and

avoid feeling personally involved in it. / And why--because the crucifixion is a cosmic drama, replayed in every ^{decade, year} generation, by every person. / A great theologian and preacher of our day once said: ~~the following~~; "Not one unusual sin was involved in the crucifixion of Jesus. Say, as we will, that the tragic result was the towering crime of history, going to a shameful death the 'young prince of glory,' still it was our small, familiar day to day sins that did it. / I have walked the streets of Jerusalem and recapitulated in detail the events of that last week, and alas, how easy for one to imagine oneself sharing in it all!"

Were

~~there~~ we there when they crucified Jesus Christ? / Consider who was there--a religious community blinded by success and unable to see a new truth, / a business community infuriated because he interrupted the profitable traffic in the temple, / a Judas caught up in his own desire, / a Pilate trying not to decide, / and a crowd--first for him, then against him. / This is not ancient history--this is ^{the} ~~an~~ ever ~~on~~ contemporary drama of man. // We have no reason to believe that Jesus would fair any better in our hands. / The faces around the cross are a mirror of humanity--in a very real sense we were there--and we still are there.

An even deeper paradox is the absolute evil of the event--and yet the Christian audacity in calling it "Good Friday." / We need to get the feeling of the evil of it all by considering the brutal reality of death by crucifixion--what it felt like--what it meant to Jesus. / It was a terrible way to die, slowly, painfully--but even worse than the physical torture was the humility and ridicule involved. / What happened on Calvary has been called the "loneliest death in all history." / His nation had rejected him as a traitor; his people as a heretic and

blasphemer. The soldiers spat upon him, the crowd jeered and mocked, one of his beloved 12 friends had betrayed him, the strongest of them denied knowing him and the rest had deserted him in terror. He was utterly alone, and that weighed upon him as heavily as the mill's and the stones and spear until he uttered the most desolate of cries: ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?")

This was man's way with God. In this one terrible event the glaring spotlight of truth shines on the evil man is capable of ~~perpetrating~~ ^{perpetrating} and yet, we call it Good Friday. This is the central paradox of human history, for in the midst of absolute evil Christianity ^{dares to} see the hand of God working an act of absolute good.

What is good about Good Friday? It was God's day; the crucifixion is not so much man's way with God as it is God's way with man. The cross is not so much a symbol of what men did to Jesus, as it is the symbol of what God did for man. The cross is not so much a symbol of man's sin as it is of God's love. On the cross of calvary a gift was given--a life laid down that we might return to a right relationship with God. This is what is good about Good Friday. It was a "good" day; an infinite and eternal good that is paradoxical, far beyond our frail reason. By God's grace--because he was there, it becomes for us, a good Friday.

This evening we have remembered the events of that day, we have ^{along the vicelabora} been spectators. We have grieved that men could have treated him so; we have felt pangs of guilt as we put ourselves in their position.

But this evening we must do more than spectate; we must incorporate this event into our own experience. What happened on Calvary was done for our sakes. We are given the gift of new life in the cross of Jesus Christ.

(*) see our face around the cross
hear our voice shouting "crucify him"
feel our resentment as he offended our prejudices
hear our voice saying "Man, I do not know him"

also that what we do is done for us
that God's love-poured out is ever present
redeeming, healing, renewing

1.
A day of contrasting emotions; a day of evil and yet an infinitely
good day; a day of deep paradox summed up in the word of the hymn:

On the Cross of Jesus, Mine ever is claim, and I

His love, the form of love who suffered there for me;
and from my stricken heart with tears, two wonders I confess--
The wonders of Redeeming love and my unworthiness.

(11)